



Jean-Baptiste Belley

The Haitian Revolution

The Haitian Revolution defeated the French Empire, abolished slavery, and shook the foundations of the Atlantic slave economy. But the struggle didn't end there.



0:01

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

*Map of the Caribbean with
an arrow pointing to the
island of Haiti*

Hello, I'm Sharika Crawford, professor of Latin American history at the U.S. Naval Academy, and I want to dig into the causes and legacies of one of the most important revolutions in world history.

The Haitian Revolution started in 1791 on the western half of a Caribbean island called Hispaniola. The island's indigenous people once called it Ayiti, and today it's called Haiti.

Here, the French colony of Saint-Domingue was France's most lucrative colony, producing sixty percent of the world's coffee and half of its sugar.

0:49

*Graphic showing the social
pyramid in Haiti on the left
and images of Haiti and its
people on the right*

The colony teetered on an unstable social pyramid. At the top were the so-called grands blancs, white plantation owners. Below them were the petits blancs, the working class and civil servants. They resented the power and wealth of the grands blancs, but they also conflicted with free people of color. Free people of color were often very wealthy and many even owned plantations, yet because of their skin color they did not enjoy the same rights as the petits blancs.

At the bottom of the social hierarchy was 90 percent of the island's population, over four hundred thousand enslaved Africans forced to work the island's plantations under brutal conditions. They made plantation owners and the French empire very rich.

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

I found an expert on the subject, Professor Marlene Daut, who will help us understand how these conditions led to revolution.

Professor, what was life like for an enslaved person in Saint-Domingue?

1:57

*Marlene Daut speaks,
facing camera, with an
image of Haiti on the right*

Life in Saint-Domingue was incredibly harsh. For an enslaved person who was forcibly transported from Africa, the life expectancy was two to three years.

*Images showing forced
African labor and slaving
ships in Haiti*

For an enslaved person born in the colony, the life expectancy was about 16 years old. There was just so much harsh punishment, so much backbreaking labor. And the colonists seemed to believe that it was cheaper to just replenish, by which I mean, keep bringing the slavers and the slaving ships and purchasing human beings to force them into labor than to actually create better conditions that would sustain human life.

*Marlene Daut and Sharika
Crawford converse, facing
the camera*

And so when writers of the time period talked about Saint-Domingue teetering you know on the edge of a volcano, like the crater of a volcano this is what they meant.

2:49

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

How did the revolution begin?

*Marlene Daut speaks,
facing camera, while a
timeline of events appears
on the right*

*Images showing Haitian
plantations on fire*

3:33

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

*Images from French
newspapers showing
violence by slaves*

*Images of the French
army arriving in Haiti*

4:34

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

*Image of Toussaint
Louverture*

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

*Images of Haitian leaders
and the island of Haiti*

5:42

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

So the Haitian Revolution formally begins in August of 1791 on the night between August 13th and August 14th at what is called the ceremony of Bois Caiman. It was a gathering of enslaved people led by a man named Boukman Dutty and another woman, a spiritual leader named Cécile Fatiman, and they basically give speeches to enslaved representatives from the plantations.

And within, you know, about a week's time, hundreds of plantations are on fire. The goal of the revolution at this moment is to set the plantations on fire, set the fields on fire, so that the slave economy can't function anymore.

How did the French government respond to this revolt in their colony?

So, the French newspaper start printing these kind of sensational and salacious tales of Black people cutting white people's heads off, killing their masters. What is really interesting is that in the early days of the revolution, it really wasn't about killing masters, and it really wasn't about hand-to-hand combat.

It was again about disrupting the slave economy by making it impossible for it to function if everything is on fire. Of course, planters defend themselves. Some of them flee to the mountains. Many of them flee to the United States, to Cuba, to Jamaica. So many of them went to New Orleans.

And so the French respond by sending ships. They send their army to sort of calm things down. They send three commissioners initially. Those commissioners are unsuccessful. They can't quell the fires.

The French couldn't stop the revolts, and to make matters worse, they were at war with the English and Spanish who sent troops to the island.

Amid all the fighting, a formally enslaved man named Toussaint Louverture emerged as one of the revolution's leaders. He allied himself with the Spanish and won victories against the French.

But in February 1794, recognizing that they were losing their colony, the French National Assembly abolished slavery.

In response, Louverture allied himself with France, forcing the Spanish army to retreat. With their freedom won, many revolutionaries now identified as French citizens. They sent leaders to represent them at the National Assembly in Paris. Leaders like Louverture played a huge role in the success of the Haitian Revolution.

He was a brilliant general and politician, playing three empires against each other. His army was aided by the mountainous geography of the island, and the spread of diseases, like yellow fever, which devastated the French, Spanish and British troops.

Most people fighting in this revolution were enslaved Africans and their descendants. How were they able to share news and information let alone engage in radical political ideas?

*Marlene Daut speaks,
facing camera*

Remember, we're in the Age of Enlightenment, and so people are talking about rights, and they're talking about what's natural to humankind and what's unnatural to humankind, and they're using words like equality and inequality.

And so, the free people of color who go back and forth are reading this material. They are digesting this material. They're bringing it back with them. And they're sailors on ships. There's the slave traders as well who sometimes bring newspapers.

And the very, very interesting thing about how news circulates is that enslaved people were great at reading between the lines. Among the enslaved themselves, they also had Haitian Creole religion, and they also had the Vodou religion, in which they could be communicating by basically practicing spirituality.

6:44

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera, while a
timeline appears on the
right*

So the revolution began in 1791, and slavery was abolished in 1794, but that's not the end of the story, is it? What happens after Napoleon comes to power in France?

*Images of Napoleon and
Toussaint Louverture on
the left and timeline on the
right*

By the time Napoleon rises to power in 1799, he has a formidable enemy in Toussaint Louverture who essentially controls the entire island.

After Toussaint Louverture rises to power, Napoleon definitely understands him as a rival, so he sends his brother-in-law to the island with what is called the Leclerc Expedition, and from Toussaint's perspective, this expedition with twenty thousand French troops is not a peaceful expedition.

*Marlene Daut speaks,
facing camera, with
timeline on the right*

Napoleon had brought back slavery. He signed a decree in May of 1802 that allowed the reinstatement of slavery in the French Empire. What they end up doing is arresting Toussaint Louverture in June of 1802.

7:38

*Images of an injured
Louverture and united
Haitian revolutionaries*

And even people who are not allied to him understand that if he can be arrested and tricked in this manner, deported to France, die a horrible death in a French prison that the same thing could happen to them, and so the revolutionaries kind of all band together. The former free people of color, the former enslaved population, they unite together, and by November of 1803, they have driven the French out. They forced them out.

And so, when they officially declare independence in January of 1804, the world is sort of stunned.

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

Why was the Haitian Revolution such a momentous world event? Why did it stun the world?

*Marlene Daut speaks,
facing camera*

It is undoubtedly true that enslaved people, they resisted their enslavement at every turn from the start to the finish, but for the vast majority of enslaved peoples, the Atlantic wars, the slave rebellions and revolutions didn't change their way of life, and this is what makes the Haitian Revolution such a monumental world event is that it wasn't just getting a few people free. It got the entire nation free from slavery, independent from France.

Map of the abolition of slavery in the Americas by country

9:17

Image of Dessalines on the left and timeline on the right

Marlene Daut speaks, facing camera

Marlene Daut speaks, facing camera, with timeline on the right

10:40

Full timeline of the Haitian struggle for independence

Sharika Crawford speaks, facing camera

Graphic showing how this age of revolutions was one of slavery

11:20

Sharika Crawford speaks, facing camera

Image of the United States Declaration of Independence

11:52

Sharika Crawford speaks, facing camera

But for the rest of the enslaved population of the Americas, in the United States, in the British colonies, and the remaining French colonies, and particularly in the Spanish colonies, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and also in the Portuguese setting of Brazil, slavery continued, and it's not abolished until 1888 in Brazil, 1873 in Puerto Rico, and there's still a huge number of people enslaved throughout almost the entire 19th century.

Independence is declared in 1804. The first Haitian constitution is written in 1805, and one of Louverture's lieutenants, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, becomes the first ruler of an independent Haiti, but he's assassinated in 1806, and there are several more rulers and constitutions and power struggles in the years that follow.

So independence isn't the end of Haiti's struggle, is it?

The fight to end slavery for Haitians didn't end with the Haitian Revolution, and one of the reasons for this is that France was still not recognizing Haitian independence, and various Haitian rulers through the years had kind of tried to see if they could negotiate with the French government to achieve recognition.

When Charles the Tenth came to power, he devised a plan whereby he told the Haitian government that if they paid France 150 million francs, the French government would finally, belatedly recognize independence.

And this is in 1825, but of course, Haitians don't have 150 million francs to pay to France, so they're forced to take out these draconian loans. They don't finish paying off all the interest that had accumulated and all the tariffs until 1947.

And so we see that the legacy of colonialism and slavery continued on after Haitians declared independence in 1804, and this was largely a punishment. It was a way to punish Haitians, for in the words of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, "daring to be free".

The Haitian Revolution was the most successful slave revolt in history, but it was certainly not the only one.

As Professor Daut has argued, this period, which is often called an age of revolutions, was also an age of slavery. Enslaved Africans in every part of the Americas resisted their enslavement.

Some scholars argue that we might better understand the Haitian Revolution as one battle in a centuries-long war across the entire Atlantic world, fought by enslaved people against their enslavers.

The Haitian Revolution shook the foundations of a world economy that depended on the labor of enslaved Africans.

It was the most radical of the Atlantic revolutions abolishing slavery and embracing in practice the idea that all men are created equal.

These ideas were so radical, so dangerous to the slave economies of the Atlantic world that the great world powers punished the new nation of Haiti with loans, tariffs, and violence. That ensured that Haitians would struggle to maintain their economy and their democracy for generations to come.